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Spy case shows Soviet contempt

By **NORMAN PODHORETZ**

NO ONE knows, or will ever know, exactly why the Soviets, on the road to a summit meeting they evidently had no wish to derail, decided to arrest an American reporter and charge him with being a spy. But it is easy enough to tell what this episode reveals about the attitude in Moscow toward the United States in general and toward the Reagan administration and the American media in particular.

When the news of Nicholas Daniloff's arrest first broke, everyone thought that the Soviets had made a great mistake. A cynical friend of mine even went so far as to suggest that if they had seized the American ambassador (or even the President of the United States!) they would have brought down less anger upon their heads than they did by messing with the American media.

Imagine, my friend said, what a liberal columnist like Anthony Lewis of the New York Times would have written if the hostage had been anyone other than a reporter.

In that case Lewis would surely have declared that while he most certainly did not condone such outrageous Soviet behavior, and while no one could feel greater anguish for the suffering of an unjustly imprisoned fellow American, this blunder by the KGB must not be allowed to stand in the way of a historic opportunity to reach a new arms-control agreement.

Instead, Lewis (like practically every other journalistic commentator in the country) not only blasted the Soviets for framing Daniloff; he even called for a cancellation of the summit unless Daniloff were unconditionally released.

Even more astonishing than this sudden willingness to treat another issue as more important than arms control was Lewis' distribution of responsibility for the crisis.

He dismissed the theory that the KGB had acted on its own in the hope of protecting Gennady Zakharov, the Soviet spy who had previously been arrested by the FBI in New York. He blamed the top Soviet leadership, up to and including Mikhail Gorbachev himself. And the only blame he assigned to the Reagan administration was for entertaining the possibility of a deal exchanging Daniloff for Zakharov. In addition to constituting an admission of the false charges against Daniloff, such weakness on our part, Lewis declared, would be an invitation to hostage-taking.

It would be hard to find a better living example of the proverb about whose ox is being gored.

The Soviets can invade Afghanistan; they can cheat on arms-control agreements; they can violate the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords; they can shoot down a civilian airliner. They can do all these things, and more, and still expect liberals like Anthony Lewis to give them the benefit of the doubt, or to interpret their crimes as responses to American provocations. But let the Soviets lay hands on an American reporter, and liberal columnists start talking like Rambo.

At least, that is, at first. After a few days, however, second thoughts began taking shape and familiar patterns began to emerge.

For example, according to Ronald Steel, the well-known left-wing journalist and biographer of Walter Lippmann, by arresting "such a petty agent as Mr. Zakharov" and then treating him "as a major spy," the Reagan administration aroused doubts in Gorbachev as to whether it really wanted a summit. Whereupon Gorbachev arrested Daniloff as a test of Ronald Reagan's intentions. Now, said Steel, Reagan could only pass this test "by agreeing to a swap of Mr. Zakharov for Mr. Daniloff" — exactly the deal Anthony Lewis had warned against.

Nevertheless, perhaps inspired by Steel's determination to get the discussion back onto its accustomed anti-American track, Lewis bethought himself and produced a second column on the affair.

Unlike Steel, Lewis did not hint at an American conspiracy to block the summit. Rather it was "the stupidity factor" he emphasized. "The mystery is how the Reagan administration could have failed to foresee retaliation for its handling of the Zakharov case." Having thus blundered through incompetence into a hole, Reagan was now being prevented by his own conservative supporters from bargaining his way out of it.

Steel's explanation from conspiracy, then, and Lewis' explanation from ineptitude reach the same conclusion: we, not the Soviets, are to blame.

I come to a different conclusion. I think the arrest of Daniloff shows that the Soviets have become contemptuous of us.

And why not? They have sat back, no doubt in happy astonishment, watching the arms-control lobby in Congress and the media putting enormous pressure on Reagan to make the very concession they most want and need — the abandonment of the Strategic Defense Initiative. They have sat back and watched Reagan, of whom they once were genuinely afraid, cave in little by little to this pressure while permitting himself to be deluded by one face-saving rationalization after another. They have sat back and watched their great nemesis grow more and more pathetically eager for a summit meeting from which he can return to universal acclaim with the promise of peace in our time.

With this metamorphosis of Reagan from a Churchill into a Chamberlain going on before their very eyes, the Soviets must have seen little or no risk in the arrest of Daniloff. And being more cynical than my cynical friends, they must also have calculated that the American media would, after an initial outburst of anger at them, quickly collapse, precisely as Anthony Lewis has done, into their usual habit of blaming America first.

In other words, from their own point of view the Soviets did not make a mistake after all when they arrested Daniloff. They acted out of contempt for us and their contempt has been richly confirmed.

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